

Syriac Music Compared to Indian Music / Dr. Philip Vysanethu. — Extrait de : Parole de l'Orient : revue semestrielle des études syriaques et arabes chrétiennes : recherches orientales : revue d'études et de recherches sur les églises de langue syriaque. — vol. 31 (2006), pp. 381-391.

Titre de couverture : Actes du 9e symposium syriacum (Kaslik, septembre 2004)

I. Music — India — History and criticism. II. Syro-Malankara Church — Liturgy — Music.

PER L1183 / FT196714P

## SYRIAC MUSIC COMPARED TO INDIAN MUSIC

BY

Dr. Philip VYSANETHU O.I.C.

### A. INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the title 'Syriac music compared to Indian Music' which directly pertains to the musicality of Syro-Malankara Liturgy which is originated from the Antiochian Liturgy. The hymns used in Syro-Malankara liturgy is either the original Syrian hymns or the translation from the Original texts. When one makes a thorough study on the fundamental principles of both Indian music and the musicality of the Syrian music it will become clear that they share the same fundamental principles. Indian music system is the oldest music system and it exists as a well defined system. Syriac music is not to be understood as a system of music but the *musicality* of Syrian hymns. This paper gives emphasis to the fact that Syro-Malankara music is not based on the principles of western music rather it is based on the fundamental principles of Oriental music which is fully manifested in Indian Music System. So any attempt to bring Syro-Malankara musicality into western music system will destroy its mystical nature. In order to prove that one has to analyse the nature of Indian music system and Syro-Malankara liturgy.

### B. THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF INDIAN MUSIC AND SYRIAC MUSICALITY

The music in Syro-Malankara liturgy is based on the fundamental principles of Indian music. If one participates in a liturgical function of Syro-Malankara liturgy one can observe that from the beginning till the end it is saturated in music. The fundamental difference of Indian and western music is the principles of *melody* and *harmony* respectively. When Indian music is based on 'melody', Western Music is centred on 'Harmony'. The dominant melody-nature makes the Indian music mystical. In the Indian music system the music is created through succession of single notes; on the other hand in the western music system it is caused by the progression of multiple notes. In other words the first one is fixed on the modal tonal character and the other on the succession of group of notes, called chords. When the melody

nature takes one to a mystical sphere, the harmony nature warms up the hearer. This difference have originated due to the climatic difference between the orient and the west. What is mentioned here is only the essential difference. There are exceptions i.e. there are also mystical compositions in western music and crisp compositions in Indian music. The *gamaka* (graces) in oriental music serve to vivify, beautify and embellish the notes of a music piece and gives a unique character and colour to it in much the same way as the harmony accompaniment to a music piece in the west. The *gamaka* contributes much to the uninterrupted flow of music. The *gamaka* are not simply the vibration of notes. In Indian music the vibration of notes are of no importance. The *gamaka* is the collective term given to the various shakes, ornaments and embellishments used in Indian music. It is not a mere accidental ornament but it is the essential part of the melodic structure. It is the graceful turn or curve or corner touch given to a note or to a group of notes that emphasises the melodic individuality of a *raga*. There is always an uninterrupted flow of melody from one note to the other in the ascending or the descending manner. If one listens to the chanting of *mantra* or the sacred books in a temple, chanting of Koran in a mosque and the singing of the liturgical prayers in a church of oriental rite, one will realise that there is a basic similarity in its musicality and mystical character. The following subtitles will deal with the theme in detail.

#### C. INDIAN MUSIC SYSTEM AS THE OLDEST MUSIC SYSTEM AND ITS BLOOD RELATION WITH SYRO-MALANKARA LITURGICAL MUSIC

When one compares Indian music with Syro-Malankara music one should analyse the basic nature of both Indian music system and Syro-Malankara musicality. The comparative study will be based on the concepts, namely, *Sruti* and *laya* (more or less *pitch* and *rhythm*), *raga* (more or less equal to scale), *kalpita* and *manodharma sangita* (pre-composed music piece and improvisation) and the oral tradition in the *Guru kula sambradaya* (staying along with the master and learning from him) that is based on the Indian concept, God as *Nada Brahma* (God as the embodiment of musical sound).

##### a. Comparison in the *sruti*, *laya* nature of Indian music

The *sruti* is the *adhara shadja*- the basic and first note 'Sa' of the *raga* in which a music piece is being composed. It can be called 'pitch' but it is more than pitch. As it is already mentioned that the *satvam* (identity / es-

sence) of oriental music is rooted in the melody-nature of the musicality and the melody exists in the basic principle of *sruti* and *laya*. *Srutir mata laya pita*, i.e. *sruti* is the mother and *laya* is the father of a music piece. This fundamental principle of melody has given rise to *raga* with its use of *gamakas*, key phrases, delicate quartertones and one-third tones. The identity of all other notes is depending upon the *adhara shadja* (the basic note 'Sa'). That is why in a concert or in a music service in the Indian tradition the *sruti* is being played on the *tamburu* (drone instrument) and the flow of the musicality is being kept intact.

Comparing this phenomenon with Syro-Malankara musicality, one can find that the same principle is followed in Syro-Malankara musicality. In the Divine Liturgy or in other liturgical services or para-liturgical services the same *sruti* is kept intact all through out the service. In western music there is no necessity for a drone, because in the course of a composition, there may be a change to parallel or related keys. This change is often notable in many of the pop music compositions in the west. It is very important to observe that the Divine Liturgy or other liturgical services of the Syro-Malankara Church, is to be taken as a 'unit'. For example the musicality of the Divine Liturgy is taken as a whole unit and it can be compared to the *sruti* principle of an Indian classical concert. In the Indian classical concert, from beginning till end the same *sruti* is kept all through. So too in the divine liturgical service, the whole unit of the service is saturated in the same *sruti*. If the *sruti* is changed the *incessant flow of the musicality* becomes abrupt, causing damage to the mystical nature of the liturgical service. Selection of the *sruti* in the Indian music is open to the free choice of the singer or singers. There is no fixed pitch in a composition so that a singer or singers can sing a composition in their own favourite *sruti*. This freedom of selecting the *sruti* is usually denied to the western musicians because the composer determines the 'pitch'/*sruti* of the composition. It is taken for granted that, in Indian music, once the *sruti* is selected the selected *sruti* must be kept till the end of the programme. This fundamental principle of Indian music is fully applied in the Syro-Malankara liturgical celebration. The prayers, the readings, hymns and even liturgical announcements are to be sung in the same *sruti*. It is interesting to note that the Syro-Malankarites, unknowingly follow this fundamental principle of *sruti*. For instance many priests prefer the first hymn «In your light we see light» to be sung in the traditional tune before the public ceremony in the Holy Qurbano. All the following hymns and chanting will be in the same *sruti* of the above-mentioned hymn. This leads to the uninterrupted flow of musicality in this liturgy. Here the very funda-

mental principle of Indian music is unknowingly followed. Another example can be given is that there is no so-called 'silence'<sup>1</sup> in the Holy Qurbano because such a 'silence' can break the flow of musicality which leads the participants to a mystical experience.

*Laya* is the time measurement in a music composition- it can be called rhythm. It is logically mentioned after *sruti* because it is associated with compositions. Generally it is named as *tala*. There is no child without a biological father and mother. So too there is no music without *laya* and *sruti*. In Indian music *laya* is a very important factor and it belongs also to the concept of Absolute music. No other music system has such a gamut of *laya* as in Indian music. Indian music employs the largest number of rhythms. There are the 35 *talas*, 108 *talas* and the four varieties of *chapu-tala* and some *Sankirna talas* or mixed time measures. The gamut of *talas* themselves makes another part of the system of Indian music. Every classical *tala* has mystical nature. It is neither simply beating on the drum (as in some of the popular music concerts or tribal dance) nor the computerised programmes of an electronic rhythm-box. *Laya* is also the manifestation of *Nada Brahma* (God as the embodiment of musical sound), which flows from the inner soul of the musician. The *Tala Vidwan* (tala-master) plays according to the phrases and nuances of the vocal or instrumental recital. In India there are maestros who can even produce musical notes on percussion instruments. That is why *Laya* is also included in *manodharma sangita* and the player has the ample chance to expose himself/herself and his/her innermost mystic *bhava* (expression). Singing to correct *sruti* and *laya* gives an excellent training (discipline). It can harmonise the functioning of body and mind.

All the hymns in the Syro-Malankara liturgy are composed in *tala*. The very fact that the Syrian hymns are written in various meters – tetra syllabic, penta syllabic, Septa syllabic, dodecca syllabic – indicates that all the hymns are determined by *tala*. *Tala* is hidden in the meter of the poetry. Unfortunately most of the translations (in *Malayalam*) of the Syrian hymns have no meter concept and naturally it is very difficult to bring them in *tala*. In the course of time, in the Syro-Malankara tradition the relevance of the *tala* is forgotten without knowing the fact that the *tala* also contributes its part to the mystical nature of the liturgy in its uninterrupted musicality and to the rhythmic balance of human nature. It is very interesting to see that some of

---

1) In some liturgical rites there will be a one-minute silence after the reading or after the sermon. Even if it is the time of meditation on the readings or sermon, often this becomes a readymade routine.

the rhythms of the Syrian hymns were adopted from the movement of day-today-life: e.g. '*Qole*' of Semaon Qooqoyo (Simon the potter). Semaon is believed to be a potter and the rhythmic movement of the potter's wheel can be traced in the *tala* of his hymns that are generally known as '*Qooqoyo*'. (Some of the hymns in the Syro-Malankara liturgy have a rhythmic nature of 'horse riding' or 'camel riding'). In a music system there are slow-tempo singing and fast-tempo singing. The same composition can be sung in slow tempo or fast tempo, but the mood will be totally different. A *tala* unit (beat) that consists of two syllables, when reduced to one syllable can be called *chauka kala* (slow tempo). This fact is similar in Indian music and Syro-Malankara liturgical music. Example: the same tune is used for a hymn in the Easter (*Qyomto*)-morning and for a hymn in the burial service. The difference is that the tune, when it is used in the *Qyomto* (divine office) will be in fast-tempo and in the burial service it will be in slow-tempo<sup>2</sup>. Sometimes it appears to be awkward and improper that in some liturgical services no attention is given to the *laya* set up of the hymns. When the slow-tempo creates an atmosphere of sorrow, the fast-tempo creates an atmosphere of joy and cheerfulness. In the Malankara liturgical singing very often little attention is given to this principle. There are many incidents where a joyful situation and a sorrowful situation are confused together and due to this reason sometimes the real context of the liturgy is being totally changed. Solemnity has nothing to do with the unnecessary prolonging or dragging of the tunes and syllables; on the other hand it consists of the proper application of the *laya* and *raga*.

It is all the more a scientifically proved fact that irregularity in singing can affect the harmonious functioning of the body and mind also. The human being is always related to the whole cosmos which has a rhythmic movement. The countless stars and planets move rhythmically and uninterruptedly. The four seasons and rain, wind, thunder, lightning, etc. are very rhythmically arranged in nature. Every thing has its own time and space. Even if for a fragment of a second, when the rhythm and the continuity are lost, the consequence will be disastrous. The human body has also a rhythmic movement. It may be fatal when the rhythmic pulse of the heart is stopped for a few seconds. The breathing, the blood circulation, the impulse of the motor nerves- every thing has a fixed and uninterrupted 'melody' and rhythm'. The movement of nature influences all living beings. In the liturgy,

---

2) Ref: Qumtho Morning: «*Nadha Nin Rajyathinmahimagamane*»; The burial service of Man/Woman: «*Nin Sarane mrtanam...*».

as everyone sings in the same *sruti* and *tala* without any interruption in its 'flowing in' and 'flowing out' of the musically, the worshipper is being elevated to the focal point of the worship.

### *b. Comparison of Raga with Oktoechos*

*Ragas* are scalar principles of Indian music. They are the soul of Indian music. There are 72 basic *ragas* and 483 derivative *ragas*. The result of multiplication of 72 with 483 gives the possible number of *ragas*-34776. In each *raga* numberless music pieces can be composed. The most evident factor which shows the relation between Indian music and Syro-Malankara liturgical music is the concept of *raga*. It is the melody-nature that makes the Indian music/oriental music mystic. In a *raga* numerous music pieces can be composed. All the compositions in a *raga* have the same nature. Each *raga* has a particular mode and temperament. Even though they are not scalar principles, the Oktoechos can be compared to *raga* in a sense that they are also creating passion or *rasa*. In the Indian music a hymn in a *raga* can be sung or played in another *raga*. The same principle is applied in the Oktoechos i.e. most of the liturgical hymns can be sung in all the eight tunes.

The very important factor in the relationship of Indian music with Syro-Malankara hymnal music is seen in the Oktoechos of Syrian music, which are called *Quinto* in Syriac. The major part of this liturgical music is brought under the eight colours. These eight colours are based on different moods – festal, sorrowful etc. (In determining a particular colour for a particular context, of course, sometimes, there are some sort of confusions and interpolations in the Syro-Malankara hymnal music). Though there is similarity in colours of Syro-Malankara hymnal music and *raga* in the Indian music, they cannot be taken in equal level because the *raga* classification of Indian music is incomparable in its scientific systematisation and the *ragas* determine the Indian music system. Innumerable hymns can be composed in a *raga*. However, the colours can be taken as *rish qole* (sample tunes).

The *gamaka* factor in the *raga* system is another point for comparison. *Gamaka* is the collective term given to the various shakes, graces, ornaments and embellishments used in Indian music. It is totally different from the 'vibration' of western music. It is not a mere accidental ornament; rather it is an essential part of the melodic structure. All *svaras* (notes) except *Shadjam* and *Panchamam* are sung in *gamka*. It is a determining factor in the *bhava* (expression) of a *raga*. In the western music system the notes being sung or played plain, are very important in its harmony-nature. On the other hand

*gamaka* is the life-giving factor of *ragas* in Indian music. It is an integral part of the music and the note with its grace makes one utterance. *Gamaka* gives colour to Indian music in as much the same way as harmony to western music. Studying the hymns of Syrian/Malankara liturgy one can find that the singing of hymns is not based on harmony but on melody. The nature of the notes can be observed as *gamakas*. The *gamaka* nature is evident not only in singing the hymns but also in the recital of prayers and readings. An example of this *gamaka* nature can be shown in the singing of the *eqbo* of *Šhimo*- Monday evening (divine office).

c. *The Comparison in the realm of Kalpita and Manodharma sangita, God as Nada Brahma*

The two channels of Indian music are *kalpita* and *manodharma sangita*, when they are already determined and fixed in their structure. On the other hand *manodharma sangita* is the music that is created spontaneously. The task of the musician in *kalpita sangita* is to reproduce the music already composed. Here the spontaneity and the creativity of the musician are limited. In the *manodharma sangita* the musician exposes both his proficiency and the mystical energy. Because of this reason *manodharma sangita* demands austerity and dedication. Down through the centuries many musicians have exposed the same musical compositions without any notation. However, it is surprising to note that all these compositions exist without losing their identity. In India music is being taught in the oral tradition, a tradition comes from the *gurukula sambradaya*. Guru is the manifestation of God as *Nada Brahma*. God as the embodiment of *nada* is a contribution of Indian Music System alone. The *Veda*, the earliest hymnal music of humanity come under '*srutis*', that means *that which is heard*, that which is heard by the sages through/in their *tapas* (deep meditation). These *srutis* are the manifestation of *Ishwar*, the Ultimate Reality. It was being 'heard'. Here lies the importance of '*Shabda*'<sup>3</sup>. The *shabda* is the external expression of that reality. It is a very meaningful and beautiful portrayal of the Ultimate reality. The sound '*oum*' has no beginning and no end, that is the eternity. *Shabda* is the *shakti* (power/energy) that creates and dissolves. The *Vedas* have their origin from 1300 B.C.<sup>4</sup> and so the concept of 'logos' originated very early with the emergence of *Vedas* as '*Srutis*'. That is why the chanting of *mantras* and the uttering of the words (*shabda*) became very important factors for the validity

---

3) Sound, word etc.

4) <http://www.encarta.msn.com>



of a sacrifice in Hindu religion. Music is the evolution from this *shabda* through *nada* and it is the manifestation of *Nada Brahma*. This aspect makes the music mystical and the mystics use music as a medium in their mystical union with the Ultimate Being. In this respect every musician becomes the manifestation of this *Brahma*. All knowledge flows from this *Nada Brahma* through the *Gurus*. Here it is very important to note that in such a system the written notes have no importance at all. The student must learn from the mouth of the *Guru*. Naturally the more the student is attached to the *guru* the more he will learn from the *guru*. In the olden time when there were no seminaries, priest-students lived together with the *malpan* (guru/pundit) and learned from him. It was a sort of *gurukula sambradaya*. The 'ekkarā' tunes have been handed down to the younger generation through this *malpan* tradition.

There are *kalpita sangita* and *manodharma sangita* in the Syro-Malankara musicality. All the liturgical hymns can be included in the *kalpita sangita* because they are already composed and the tunes are fixed. The readings, chanting of *promion-sedro* and the reciting of prayers etc. are *manodharma sangita*. A *Malankarite* (faithful of the Syro-Malankara Church) does not 'read' the bible but 'recite' it. This recital has a *raga*-nature (musical nature), which is inherited from the ancestors. When two people recite a Bible passage in two different occasions, there will not be difference in the *raga bhava* (expression of musicality), if at all any difference it will be only in the style of the recital. This is the fundamental principle of Indian music, which is inherited by the *Syro-Malankarites*. This recital is according to the *manodharma* of the reader, but not based on any written principle. The recital of *promiom-sedro* can be remotely compared to the *raga alapana* or *svara sanchara alapana* (recital of *svaras*) in Indian music. The mystical nature of the one who recites is manifested in the recital. The spontaneity and the creativity of the performer are blended in the recital.

Beauty in diversity and unity in diversity is a prominent character of the Orient. In the Syro-Malankara liturgy there is no written notation for any of the liturgical hymns and in the 'singing' of Holy Qurbono; yet there exists a notable similarity in the way of singing the Holy Qurbono. Even though there is a similarity in the manner of singing, one has one's own style and contribution in the celebration of the Holy Qurbono and in other liturgical celebrations. (The style of singing the Liturgy is called in Malayalam '*cholth*'). The spontaneity and creativity is very important in the liturgical celebration because it removes the boredom of the routine activity. For the mystics, the

relation with the ultimate is very dynamic. So too in the liturgy, one's experience of the mystical union with God is dynamic and fresh. In such a relation there is no place for boredom and weariness. It is to be noted that the Syro-Malankara people are blessed with such spontaneity in the liturgy and para-liturgical life that they can pray spontaneously. This spontaneity and creativity is found not only in praying but also in singing. When one prays spontaneously, one's heart speaks. When one speaks of spontaneity and creativity, it does not mean that there is no need of uniformity and structure. Uniformity is required in community singing and other recitation. In the individual performance in a liturgical service one must be allowed to execute one's spontaneity and creativity without disturbing the liturgical context or setting.

*d. Avartana (repetition) in Indian music and Syro-Malankara musicality*

Repetition is certainly part of our life. To some, it is dull, non productive; to others, repetition connotes peace, a framework for the inner person to awaken and to think in depth. From childhood on we learn good and evil from repetition. Physical and intellectual fitness also require repetition<sup>5</sup>. As Maureen Morgan has stated, in our daily life repetition plays a vital role. The experience of love is in the repetition and it shows a loving intimacy between the two people who love one another. That is why a love pair repeatedly says: «I love you darling». A loving intimacy between Jesus and the Father is pictured in the verse, «I am in the Father and the Father is in me»<sup>6</sup>. In the Old Testament and in the New Testament there are many examples for prayer of repetition. The psalms are a good example of prayer of repetition. In the tradition of early fathers, 'Jesus-prayer' is a famous method of prayer. The repeating of the Holy name of Jesus could produce in us inner tranquillity and strength and it could make one to withstand all the evil desires.

Repetition of words or even stanzas is a special character of Indian Music. Chanting of *mantras*, *Nama japa* (repeating the name of God) etc. come under *avartana* that helps one to fix his/her mind on the focal point. In the Indian music system there are repetitive music forms. For example the *Niraval* singing or *Pallavi* singing are really repetition of words and stanzas, though they are sung in different tunes and in different *ragas*. The repetition in Indian Music is not simply uttering what has already been said, but the repetition gives rise to new interpretation of a piece. The expression or *raga*

5) Maureen MORGAN, *Music of the Eastern Greek Churches*, Pastoral Music; National Association of Pastoral Musicians, Feb-March, 1988, p. 18.

6) John. 14:10; R.S.V.

is fully expressed in repetition. When the musician repeats a line or a stanza, each time the expression and the 'tune' will be new. Therefore, *avartana* in Indian music is not monotony, not at all dull and non-productive, but it is creative and refreshing.

Repetition is a notable character of the Syro-Malankara liturgy too. Many of the repetitions have their own hidden meaning also. An example is the salutation of the priest: «peace be with you all». In the holy Qurbono this is said repeatedly. The explanation is that after the resurrection whenever Jesus appeared to his disciples, he said, «peace be with you». So too in the liturgy the peace of the Risen Lord is repeatedly proclaimed. When the priest repeats, «I, a weak and sinful servant...», he acknowledges his sinful nature and at the same time acknowledges the sanctity of God. It is a two-dimensional aspect. Only brooding over one's own sinful nature makes in him/her a negative impact. On the other hand acknowledging the holiness of God and at the same time trusting in his *healing love* makes one strong. Many prayers are repeated for three times because 'three' is the symbol of fullness. The singing of 'trisagion' – «*Holy are you O God; Holy are you the strong; Holy are you the deathless who is crucified for us, have mercy on us*» – is a very old tradition in the Oriental Churches especially in the Syro-Malankara Church. By singing the 'trisagion' one acknowledges the sanctity of God and at the same time expresses one's desire to become holy. When one repeats something it becomes familiar to him/her. So too repetitive music in Syro-Malankara liturgy helps the worshipper to concentrate on the focal point of the worship.

#### D. CONCLUSION

In the analysis of the nature of Indian music and when it is compared with the nature of Syro-Malankara musicality one can come to the conclusion that they are similar in their basic principles i.e. *sruti-laya*, *raga*, etc of Indian music system. Even though the Syro-Malankara musicality cannot be taken as a systematised musically it has inherited the traits of Indian music. This liturgy has been evolved in India and by the very reason it has a 'blood-relation' with Indian culture and music. Any attempt to merge this musicality into western music will result in the destruction of its mystical nature. The development and growth of Syro-Malankara liturgical musicality will depend on the acknowledgment of this blood relation and exploring into the unlimited horizon of Indian music.

## E. GLOSSARY

*Avartana*: repetition

*Gamaka*: various graces and ornaments of a *svara*

*Guru kula sambradaya*: ancient system of education in which the student lived with the master and learned. (*Guru*=master; *Kula*=family; *Sambradaya*=system)

*Japa*: utterance

*Kalpita sangita*: already composed music piece

*Laya*: system of rhythms

*Manodharma sangita*: spontaneous creation of music

*Mantra*: chant

*Nada Brahma*: God as the embodiment of nada

*Nada*: musical sound

*Nama*: name

*Niraval, pallavi*: music forms in Indian music

*Om kara*: embodiment of 'aum' - the eternal sound

*Panchamam*: the fifth note of the seven notes called 'Pa'

*Raga bhava*: expression of *raga*

*Raga*: scalar principle, that which produces passion

*Shabda*: sound

*Shadjam*: the first note of the seven notes called 'Sa'

*Shakti*: power, energy

*Shruti*: that which is heard

*Sruti*: more or less similar to pitch

*Svara*: musical note

*Tala*: rhythm

Musical notes in Indian music: Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Da, Ni

Bethany Fathers Generalate

Kalathipady

Kottayam, Kerala - **India**

E-mail: philipvysanethu@hotmail.com

Fr. Dr. Philip VYSANETHU